The Stage as a Pulpit

BY FRANKLIN FYLES.

New York, Sept. 13.—The wife in "The Thief" is a spendthrift. The desire of her extravagance is to beautify herself in the eyes of her husband, so that he will be steadfast in his love, and not revert to his bachelor habits of promiscuous resort to more beautiful women. To that end she buys gowns, hats and lingerie in the costliest modes, and steals the money with which to pay bills not audited by the husband. The predicament for her and others is deplorable. The wife in "The Movers" comes of a family of plentiful spenders and scant payers. She blithely shifts her expenses of wardrobe from her father to a husband who, when his income drops hopelessly below the outgo, and he fails to bunco a friend for more capital, blows out the small amount of brain that is in his aching head. The wife in "The Man on the Case" is so lavish in her outlays that her husband, under the stress of Wall street losses, pawns her jewelry and has a hades of a time getting it back.

* * *

So three plays new in Broadway this week have for a theme the evil of feminine extravagance. Perhaps this is not surprising in view of the vogue of social problems on the stage, and the rapidly multiplying feminine spendthrifts off the stage. The playwrights, casting about for subjects, hit easily on woman's vanity. Such plot as there is in the new nonsense play, "The Rogers Brothers in Panama," turns on a quest of $25,000 with which to keep up appearances in society. Who says the stage isn't a pulpit and a rostrum for the teaching of moral lessons?

* * *

Topping in effectuality the other plays of femininely frenzied finance is "The Thief." A repellant title, but pertinent. And then, too, Margaret Illington is its thief. You may know that Margaret is a brilliantly handsome actress, but not until Monday evening did she show enough of genius to make people admire a thief—a sneak thief at that—a thief who steals money from her admirable hostess, and permits that hostess's boyish son to shield her by falsely declaring himself the criminal. "The Thief" was original in French, by Henri Bernstein, and it is a play of soul, heart and especially brain; so brave of purpose, too, that I doff my hat and bow low to its author. But I don't believe that any American author could get American footlights to shine on a drama with a thief for a heroine. Bernstein placed his work in Paris, where managers welcome oddity and are willing to take the risk of it.

It is easy to see, now that Margaret Illington has triumphed with it, why she was glad to personate a thief; it is love that makes her steal; and she is a pitiful sufferer, because the jealous husband accuses her of disloyalty as well as dishonesty. She is misunderstood, and a woman gets a lot of satisfactory misery out of a really cruel misunderstanding. Margaret makes her audience weep copiously, and that is enough to make an actress happy. But I can't understand why Kyrle Bellew consented to appear as the husband who, although reasonable, still is obdurate in his condemnation. Audiences dote on men who stand by their wives, right, wrong and anyway. Wonderful in juvenility is this Bellew. Close to sixty, he looks no more than forty. Perhaps he tired of ornate romanticism, enjoyed two years of thievery as Raffles, and likes to keep on in the ways of Sherlock Holmes and Anna Catherine Green. It looks odd, however, to see an old star stand around, saying "Yes" and "No," "Oh" and "Ah," while a new star has a plenty of language with which to make fame. Think, too, of the dignified Bellew letting his nose be pulled for fun by an actress hardly more than one-third his age. Bernstein doesn't provide entrances for his heroine and hero, as native authors are told to, but discloses them seated side by side. Nor need he be coerced to provide "comedy relief" throughout the play. After the first five minutes, during which the playfully fond wife pulls the husband's nose, just to see if she can make him look like the nasally odd de Bergerac, there isn't a gleam of merriment. The author is privileged to keep close down to his pathetic theme.

* * *

I don't have to tell the story of "The Thief" to describe the uncommon ingenuity of the complication. An amateur detective convinces himself that the household's son is the thief, and the innocent young fellow, knowing that the culprit is the woman of his infatuation, says "guilty" when he is accused. There's nothing original in that, you say. And I agree, too, that the heroine is not very unusual when, seeing the predicament that the lad gets into for love of her, impulsively blurts out a confession to save him. The play might end with the impassioned plea with which she convinces her husband that her crime has been committed for love of him. Surely, a wife stealing money with which to decorate herself, and thereby keep her husband charmed, might serve as a play's bid for consideration. But the husband has no sooner forgiven his wife for being a thief—since love of him is her plea in extenuation—than suddenly he bethinks him that love must be the reason why the boy becomes her scapegoat. Has she broken the third commandment as well as the fourth? He thinks so, and that is more than he will forgive. The audience knows her to be a loyal wife, and weeps profusely over her double trouble—until 11 o'clock—when the truth prevails, and the play ends smilingly.

* * *

Martha Morton Cohn and Grace Livingston Furniss are ladies in well-up circles of New York fashionable society with a literary tinge to it. They are writers of many plays, too. By chance they both set out to write stage expositions of the evils of modish extravagance so simultaneously that "The Movers" and "The Man on the Case" were introduced only one day apart. But there was more than that of separation in the nature of the two works. One is tragical and the other farcical. It is Mrs. Cohn who, in "The Movers," points her moral by driving a spendthrift to suicide. He is a Wall street operator, so close to millions in his business that thousands seem insignificant, and so he gratifies his flighty young wife's costly desires until bankruptcy halts his recklessness at home and in the street.

* * *

An auction sale is the main novelty in "The Movers." The furnishings of a very luxurious residence are sold under the hammer at a tithe of their cost. The house is invaded by a rabble. The family retreats from room to room, humiliated, hopeless, until the half-crazed husband shuts himself in an apartment and the audience hears the pistol shot that kills him. To the end of the second act, and up to the suicide, this play is cogent, engrossing and effectual, with Vincent Serrano and Dorothy Donnelly as the husband and wife. During the intermission the talk about it was that here we had a social problem drama as good as "The Lion and the Mouse" or "The Man of the Hour," but the second half was a diminuendo.

* * *

The husband and father of an extravagant family in "The Man on the Case" steals his wife's diamonds to pawn, fixes up a fake burglary, calls in a private detective, and thus tries to hold off bankruptcy until his daughter can marry an heir to thirty millions. This wealthy chap is a stranger, and so is able to change guises with the sleuth, thereby gaining an opportunity to win the girl on his merits. Miss Furniss has taken a stale idea, as you see, but she freshens it with original fun, and the outcome is a merry farce, with Jameson Lee Finney coming out strongly as an Ananias light comedian, telling tales of his superiority to Sherlock Holmes in exploits of detection, and at the same time finding out about the bogus robbery. While he wooes the girl as the detective, the real detective displeases her with coarseness as the millionaire, and all comes out right. The girl's getting of a thirty times millionaire, while believing she is losing him, is made agreeable by Elsie Leslie Winter, who has for a year or two been seen in the parquet of New York theatres, with her father-in-law, the venerable yet still vigorous William Winter, but now reappears on the stage to show that she is an adept comedienne.

* * *

The detective figuring as the man of money is a study in slang. How keen Americans are to that sort of wit. The stealer of the diamonds, seeing that he is likely to be exposed, decides to take the man off the case.

"You're goin' t' git the rubber ball," says the detective.

The first audience laughed instantly, and the millionaire had to wait to explain with: "Oh, I see. I'm to get the bounce." Of course, the people wouldn't laugh again, and even seemed a little miffed by the aspersion on its alertness. Now, what was to be done. The explanation had to be cut out, surely; but that left the verbal bounce of the rubber ball with Charles Lamb, when it had been meant for the "featured" Mr. Finney. I don't know that Finney complained, yet Miss Furniss came to his help, and in the third performance the ball rebounded to him, while Lamb still kept a little hit at it.

"You're goin' t' be t'rown down," Lamb now says.

"Oh, I see," Finney responds; "I'm to get the rubber ball." And so the laugh is transferred to the principal comedian.

* * *

A brief paragraph as to the coincidence through which those plays in a week resemble one another in subject. It has come by chance altogether. Yet I have known charges of plagiarism to be credited on less convincing evidence. The tendency of the time is to depict the foibles of modern society on the stage. About the most obvious of these is the fashionable woman's waste and want of money. What wonder, then, that one man in Paris and two women in New York should simultaneously take up that manifest evil to exploit theatrically? A dozen more plays wouldn't exhaust the theme.

* * *

Which is Gus Rogers and which is Max? Likely Maud Raymond knows, she being the wife of one. No consequence in dramatic art depends on the answer. They are funny fellows paired, and who cares if the smaller one is Gus, or if he is Max, so long as he continues to thrust his interrogatory nose up close to the bigger one's exclamatory mouth in vacuous ignorance? German-American dialect teams have been made up in that way of cross-matching since Lew Fields and Joe Weber passed themselves up from vaudeville to burlesque. The smaller partner is always the Patsy Bolivar of the firm. The brothers Rogers bubbled up from Bowery dregs to Broadway froth when their dialogues were a specialty in a musical farce, all the rest of which failed miserably; so the manager put them forth as star comedians; and from that time to this they have appeared annually in a new gambol, from "The Rogers Brothers in Wall Street" through six in other places to "The Rogers Brothers in Panama;" and don't you see the value of titles that compel newspapers to name the actors every time they refer to their play? McNally, author of the series, until now Maguire and Hoffman take his place as maker of the material, should by right have held a patent on the device.

The initial impression given by McNally's successors is an unfavorable prejudice when one sees in the program the names of the Rogers characters—Hugo Kisser and A. Gustave Windt. Do you get it? Hug-and-kiss-her and A-gust-of-wind. Each pun has to be explained to an audience that even then wouldn't laugh at it. But there are so many things so much funnier that the new show is, I think, the best of all that have borne the Rogers brand. And that is true, notwithstanding that, although it sends the Rogers brothers to Panama, all expectation of travesty or burlesque of the canal project meets with disappointment. The pet Rooseveltian project is hardly more than mentioned. The chorus begins a song with "Panama, oh Panama," for its catch-line; and pretty soon they are warbling and wabbling to a rythm of "Way Down in Colon Town;" but neither shovel nor hoe makes any dirt fly, and Roosevelt's isthmian policy isn't attacked nor defended. The Rogerses go to Panama as valets, but are hired to make believe they are admirals in the United States navy. The job is beset with difficulties that send the two frauds to jail; and their escape from durance is an oddly spectacular incident to put into a musical farce. After getting out of the prison, they dive into the ocean and swim for a distant island. The scene changes to the open sea, with waves that look sloppy in the light of a shiny moon, and the two actors floating wonderfully like real swimmers. Goodness, but we do move in stage illusions. Thirty years ago, Dion Boucicault had the dear little Colleen Bawn thrown into a pool of mosquito netting water, and sprang to her rescue from a fret-sawed rock to a soft mattress, to the delight of thrilled spectators. There was but the faintest suggestion of reality. Now, there is moving photography to turn the canvas into waves, with an electro-lighted moon to shine, with a moving panorama to make the shores seem to stand still while the stationary swimmers appear to get along like racers. The inventor of that tricky sight might be money in pocket if he had held it out for a melodrama; yet in extravaganza it has the value of unexpected novelty.

* * *

I don't say it because I know it, for it is merely a guess, that the Rogerses, now having their own way under their own management, are disposed to be less like conversational specialists and more like legitimate comedians. Surely, they add acting to their talking, singing and dancing much more than ever before. And they let their very good tenor voices go in higher range of vocalism. I wonder if it is so that Maud Raymond, being a cause of dissension between the brothers, retired in the interest of peace. Somewhere or other, they have discovered a Marion Stanley, who sings so very well that she helps them up into semi-operatic heights. Also, she is a graceful dancer, a keen humorist, and so much of a mimic that she gives imitations of other persons in the play. Where did they come across the bushel under which she was hiding her talents?

"But she has one grievous fault," said a smart-set girl.

"And what may that be?" I asked.

"Her hips," was the calm reply.

It is so. Marion is comely, if not extra pretty, but at her widest she is wider than symmetry permits. Indeed, she would be barred from the chorus for that offense. And this Rogers show is to a considerable extent an unskirted girl exhibition. Even those dainty dolls of delicate dancing dignity, the Hengler sisters, Flo and May, are made to see their own ankles for about a minute in masculine garb. The ordeal seems to stun them. But relief comes to the sisters Hengler in the brothers Rogers, seemingly stripped for the swim that I told of; and then a section of the ballet chorus divert attention by trooping forth in casings skin-tight, though not skin-hued, from neck to heels. That is when they march into the arena as picadors at a bull fight, in which the Rogerses figure as toreadors, and end the show by cutting a bull in two sections.